

Religious politics

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

There was a time when conservative Christians didn't publicly link their faith and their politics, and many avoided getting involved in politics at all. They left that to their more liberal brethren, such as the many Christians who were moved by their faith to take part in civil rights and anti-war movements.

But that all changed in the 1980s, and one of the prime movers of that change was the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who died Tuesday at 73. Agree or disagree with him, one cannot deny that the founder of the Moral Majority had a profound influence on politics and culture in the past two decades and made politicians pay more than lip service to what Falwell and other like-minded Christians, and non-Christians alike, called "family values."

In a news release issued Tuesday, the Traditional Values Coalition called Falwell a "visionary who recognized decades ago that Christians had the moral duty to be involved in our culture, and that included the political arena." That was a vital message many conservative Christians took to heart, and it changed American politics.

On more than one occasion, that vision was divisive and impolitic. Falwell's views on abortion, stem cells and gays, in particular, and his apocalyptic vision - which included blaming Sept. 11, 2001, on America's sins and claiming that the Antichrist was already on Earth in the form of a male Jew - were prime and legitimate targets of critics. But while he apologized for his more inflammatory statements, he never apologized for his beliefs or for a message that gave hope and meaning to millions of people. The religious movement he mobilized is still tugging at the soul of the GOP and at many voters. It will continue to do so even if Falwell has finished his fight and run his race, keeping his faith throughout.

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